

THRILLING

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FEATURING
Lords of the Morning
By EDMOND HAMILTON

Cholwell's Chickens
By JACK VANCE

Wonder

STORIES

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A THRILLING
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THRILLING Wonder STORIES

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AUGUST, 1952

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SAMUEL MINES, Editor

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HALLUCINATION

By
**CHARLES
E. FRITCH**

●
The three
eyes
watched
wherever he
went. . . .



JOHN TAYLOR was certain he was going mad.

At breakfast, he ignored his eggs, bacon, and toast, and stared uncertainly into his coffee. From the other side of the table came the rattle of newspaper and his wife's voice.

"They're sending that rocket up to Mars next week," she said. "The way the government can spend our money is amazing."

"They have special committees," John Taylor forced himself to joke, "who stay awake nights thinking of ways."

Bravely, he clutched his cup in a firm grip, lifted it to his lips, and stared

over it at his wife. Her eyes met his. Three of them.

The cup fell from his trembling fingers, clattering onto the saucer, spilling coffee. He leaped up, alarmed.

"I—I'm sorry. Clumsy." He tried vainly to undo the damage with a napkin.

"I'll take care of it," his wife said. Her eyes were full of concern; there were only two of them now. "Aren't you feeling well, John?"

John Taylor shook his head. "Been having headaches," he said. "Nervous." He didn't tell her he'd been seeing a psychiatrist.

"Maybe you'd better stay home," she suggested.

He smiled wanly. "No, I'll be all right. It's nothing."

Okay, so he was going off his rocker. So what? Lots of people do. But why in the devil did he have to do it so conspicuously? Why not simply crawl unobserved into some dark corner and quietly blow a fuse or two? Why did he have to suddenly start imagining that people were turning into three-eyed monsters who had four tentacles in place of the conventional two arms? It was crazy.

Correction: *he* was crazy.

HE KISSED his wife goodbye, and with a feeling of horror felt four arms around him. He turned away without looking at her, and concentrated on the sand crunching softly beneath his feet. Sand? As he looked, it blurred, becoming hard concrete. He felt a mad impulse to run, but he managed to control the urge.

The air felt cold and thin, and the sun seemed too far away, a small orange disc in a dark sky. Overhead, triangular aircraft flitted, taking owners to work. He shook his head, and the air grew warmer, thicker, and the sun resumed its normal size. The aircraft became sparrows going nowhere.

Last time the psychiatrist had given him an injection of an unpronounceable something which had cleared his mind. But now it must be wearing off.

"We may have to try shock," the psychiatrist had suggested.

"That's okay," he told the man. "Anything. Anything."

He walked slowly down the street. Work was out of the question. How could he work with people whose features continually shifted; who had three eyes, then two, then three; whose bodies changed from human to nonhuman?

Even walking down the street was something of an effort. People hurried about him, unnoticing, their eyes straight ahead. But it was the third

eye; the third eye that turned to follow him as he passed. The way they looked you'd think he was the one who was odd.

They were probably right, but the knowledge did not diminish the hallucinations. Even the buildings around him swayed uncertainly. They were the high, many-windowed structures he had known all his life; and then, suddenly, the image shifted, and they were low, squatting things, hugging sand.

Sand? He blinked. Sand?

He boarded the subway and saw women hanging on straps with one of four tentacles, men with three eyes perusing newspapers. He closed his eyes, listening with infinite care to the awkward clatter of wheels on rail. When he opened his eyes again, both women and men had returned to the style of arms and eyes in conventional numbers.

IT MAY not work, you know," the psychiatrist warned. His three eyes glittered.

"That's okay. I—I've got to try. I'll try anything!"

An assistant strapped him to the table.

John Taylor wet his lips. "Will—will it hurt?"

"Not a bit," they assured him.

Eight tentacles strapped him down. They made him comfortable with something soft and pillowy under his head and uncomfortable with something soft and cottony to keep his teeth apart.

"Relax," the psychiatrist said, "it'll be over in seconds."

A tentacle reached for a switch. Beside him, the assistant watched with three dispassionate eyes.

John Taylor felt sudden panic. They're trying to kill me, he thought wildly. I've discovered their secret, and they're going to electrocute me!

The thought was followed by a brief calmness as stray fragments of thought combined. Their secret? Of course. They *were* monsters. People from—from Mars, probably, who had kept up an illusion for Earthmen like himself. Be-

cause of some freak accident a wire had become crossed in his mind, and the illusion was becoming weaker, breaking down. He had discovered their secret, and they couldn't afford to let him live.

The tentacle gripped the switch. John Taylor tried to scream, but the cloth in his mouth gagged him. Tension mounted; he struggled vainly to escape.

The switch fell, and a searing force blotted his consciousness.

AFTER Taylor had left, the psychiatrist wrote down his name, a few words of description, and then closed the notebook with a sigh of satisfaction.

"Closing the case?" said his assistant.

The psychiatrist nodded, his three eyes glittering. "May as well. That seemed to do the trick."

"Strange case," mused the assistant.

"Yes," the psychiatrist agreed. He leaned back and rested one of four tentacles on the chair arm. "In fact, first case I've heard of with that particular hallucination."

"Do you suppose the space rocket had anything to do with it?"

The psychiatrist gazed through the window at the low, squat buildings hugging red sand.

He recalled wonderingly the patient's description of them as being at times tall and thin; weird architecture even for hallucinations!

"I suspect the space rocket had a lot to do with it," he said. "In fact, I'm surprised there're not more cases like that."

"That description of his wife got me," the assistant said.

"Weird, wasn't it?"

"Like somebody from another planet." His voice turned unbelieving and a little distasteful. "For awhile he even thought we looked like that!"

"A soft, pink creature," the psychiatrist recalled, "with *two* eyes, *two* tentacles."

The assistant shuddered. "*Two!* Grotesque."

"One good thing about the space rocket, though," the psychiatrist said. "When it comes back, at least we'll find out what the people of Earth are *really* like."



*Two Terran Slickers Meet the Bird-Folk of Mars . . . and
Get Plucked . . . in a Sparkling Satire!*

THE BIRD OF TIME

An Interplanetary Novel

By WALLACE WEST

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FEATURED IN OUR NEXT ISSUE!